

## **U.S. Policy toward Cuba: Forty-Six Years of Failure**

*ENCASA/US-CUBA, the Emergency Network of Cuban American Scholars and Artists for Change in U.S.-Cuba Policy, is a national organization of over one hundred and fifty Cuban American scholars and artists supported by another two hundred and fifty non-Cuban-born academics and professionals in 35 states plus Washington DC.*

By any measure, U.S. policy toward Cuba has been an abject failure for almost half a century. That policy has become even harsher and more counterproductive under the Bush administration.

U.S. policy inflicts economic hardship on the Cuban people, restricts the right of all Americans to travel freely, interferes with the family bonds of separated Cuban/Cuban American families by severely limiting the right to visit loved ones (only one visit every three years is allowed to a very narrowly defined set of close relatives and there are no humanitarian exceptions), denies opportunities to farmers and businesses in this country, alienates our nation from friends and allies in this hemisphere and the world, does nothing to promote democracy and human rights on the island, and violates fundamental American values and principles. In sum, our current policy toward Cuba is an utter political and moral failure. These are the reasons that impelled us to come together and raise our voices in opposition to that policy.

### **Questions and answers about U.S.-Cuba policy**

#### **What is the goal of the policy?**

The goal of the policy is regime change. At different times, this policy has been pursued through a number of means, including diplomatic isolation, a disastrous CIA-organized invasion using a proxy force of Cuban exiles (the Bay of Pigs in April 1961), assassination plots, sabotage raids launched from the United States (Operation Mongoose in the 1960s), and support to dissidents. However, the embargo, a strategy of punishing the island economically through unilateral (U.S. trade ban) and multilateral means (use of U.S. power to deny loans by international financial institutions and to discourage other nations from trading with Cuba), has been and continues to be the centerpiece of the policy. Even when a country has trade relations with Cuba, its corporations with U.S. ties or with products that incorporate U.S. components are prohibited from doing business with Cuba. Often the embargo leads to absurd results and ends up hurting innocent people. Most recently, for example, a 13-year-old boy who won an award in a U.N. environmental contest was unable to receive his prize, a Nikon camera, because the boy is Cuban and the camera had U.S. components.

#### **How long has the embargo been in place?**

The embargo was formally enacted in 1962. Some elements of the embargo have been in place since 1960. Major actions to harden it took place successively in 1992 (the Torricelli law), 1996 (the Helms-Burton law), and 2004 and 2006 (Bush administration U.S. Treasury rules).

## **What does the embargo prohibit?**

The U.S. embargo against Cuba is arguably the strictest and most comprehensive sanctions regime imposed by this country on any nation, including Iran, Syria, and North Korea. It bans almost all trade and travel, including travel by Cuban Americans, with the exception of one limited trip every three years exclusively to visit immediate family members.

## **Who is affected by the embargo?**

The freedom of all Americans is curtailed by the travel restrictions. While U.S. academics, journalists, and students are allowed to travel under certain conditions, the embargo makes it virtually impossible for most Americans to engage in educational or cultural travel to Cuba. U.S. economic sanctions adversely affect the health and nutrition of the Cuban people, making a bad economic situation even worse. Cuban Americans, unique among the citizens of this nation, are denied the right to freely visit friends and relatives in their home country and to use their hard-earned money to assist loved ones as they see fit.

## **Why is the policy a failure?**

As a result of current policy, almost everyone is worse off, including the Cuban people, Cuban Americans in this country, U.S. taxpayers, students, scholars, business people and farmers, as well as U.S. prestige in the world.

The policy is based on the premise that strangling the Cuban economy, together with an ever-increasing worldwide isolation of the government, will cause a popular uprising and the overthrow of the government. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the Torricelli and Helms-Burton laws were promoted under the theory that the loss of massive Soviet assistance had made Cuba so vulnerable that an intensified embargo coupled with aid to the opposition on the island would trigger regime change. But more than ten years after the enactment of those laws, the approach—another version of “destroying the village in order to save it”—has failed on all counts. The Castro government has outlasted ten U.S. presidential administrations, from Dwight Eisenhower to George W. Bush.

The policy runs contrary to what the U.S. has sought with two other communist nations: China (since 1972, which in the last 30 years has become integrated into the global economy and forged relationships at all levels with the U.S. to the benefit of both countries); and Vietnam (since 1994, when trade relations were reestablished only 19 years after the end of a war in which over 58,000 Americans were killed, so that today the U.S. is Vietnam’s largest market and Americans are its second largest source of tourists).

As successive recommendations from President Bush’s “Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba” have shown, there is little more that the U.S. can do to further undermine the economy short of military action or a prior overthrow of the governments of Cuba’s key trading partners, Venezuela and China, options that are not realistic. (Venezuela supplies oil on favorable terms; both countries have extended credits to Cuba.) In the 1990s there was a chance that the policy could work, but the Cuban economy has recovered and is now one of the fastest-growing in Latin America. Cuba has rebuilt its electrical grid and is doing likewise with its transportation system from buses to trains to airplanes. It is remodeling airports, undertaking urban renewal

projects, and has begun a massive housing-construction program nationwide. Its tourist industry is booming and the prices of sugar and nickel-cobalt are up. Cuba is rebuilding herds decimated by ten years of drought and increasing its agricultural production, forming joint ventures abroad to market its biotechnology, and is expected to announce shortly a find of commercially valuable oil deposits. This has not made life easy for the people of Cuba, to be sure. In many sectors, Cuba is only now catching up with pre-1991 production levels. It is enough, however, to keep the government from collapsing and the population from considering an uprising.

As for isolation, what has been accomplished is exactly the opposite of what was intended: the United States, not Cuba, has suffered isolation as a result of our policy. The U.S. is practically alone in the world in its insistence on the embargo. For 15 consecutive years since 1992, with growing global unanimity, the vote at the United Nations has expressed world condemnation for the U.S. embargo; on November 8, 2006, the vote was 183 to 4. (The 4 voting “no” were the U.S., Israel, Palau and the Marshall Islands.) Moreover, in September 2006, Cuba began a three-year presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement, which is made up of 116 developing countries and aims to represent the political, economic and cultural interests of the developing world.

Meanwhile, the Cuban government continues to find domestic support in nationalist appeals to the people and justifies its internal policies on the basis of the national security threat posed by U.S. actions. The embargo has been highly effective in making life more difficult for Cubans, but useless insofar as achieving a change in the policies or government of Cuba.

### **Don't the American people support the embargo?**

For many years polls have shown that the majority of U.S. citizens are against the embargo. Most recently, in August 2006, shortly after 80-year-old Fidel Castro was hospitalized for major surgery, a CNN poll found that 62% of Americans believed that the U.S. should normalize relations with Cuba now, and 69% believed that should take place if Raúl Castro replaces his brother as head of the government. The latter has already occurred, at least on a temporary basis.

### **Don't Cubans support the embargo?**

All evidence shows that a majority of the population, including most of the dissidents and the Catholic Church, oppose a policy that is ostensibly maintained for their own good. The main enthusiastic supporters of the embargo are hard-line exiles in Miami who left Cuba in the 1960s and are not affected by the embargo because most of their family members are safely in this country but who often derive income and status in the U.S. from espousing the hard line.

### **Won't all that change when Castro dies?**

The President's experts (drawn from U.S. agencies represented in the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, which provided recommendations in 2004 and 2006) predicted widespread civil unrest as soon as Fidel Castro died or became unable to govern. After his operation and incapacitation, however, nothing happened. Life went on as usual and the succession that the State Department insisted would not happen in fact began, without major obstacles or upheavals. The hope that competing power groups would form, and that one or more would call upon the U.S. to intervene, has turned out to have been mere wishful thinking. To the contrary, many

observers now see a collective leadership forming that would likely undertake reforms but not totally abandon the socialist and nationalist project.

### **What would be a better U.S. policy?**

A first step should be to take stock realistically of the situation, as summarized above, looking for information and advice from sources outside Miami and considering more flexible and pragmatic approaches to relations with Cuba. The other countries of the region can provide new perspectives on the issue.

Cuba has signaled its willingness to work with the U.S. in matters of common interest, such as drug interdiction and hurricane response. The U.S. should respond more positively within the current laws, and put the Cubans to the test rather than viscerally discarding all possibilities.

Matters that are not controlled by statute, such as OFAC travel rules, can be reviewed with an eye to permitting easier contacts with the Cuban people, especially family and academic travel. The State Department can begin to issue visas to artists, academics, and sports teams that now are routinely denied entry to the U.S., often on the presumption that musicians, scholars, and baseball players represent a danger to national security. Rules designed to hamper the growing commerce in agricultural and food items should be changed to permit more normal trade.

### **What about statutory constraints?**

The principal law that defines the U.S.-Cuba relationship is the Helms-Burton law. Essentially, Helms-Burton codified into a single law those restrictive policies and statutes in existence in 1996 that are commonly referred to as the embargo. Helms-Burton sets out strict conditions to be met by Cuba before the United States will restore normal commercial and diplomatic relations. Thus, Helms-Burton freezes into place, by legislative mandate, an extraordinarily harsh but unsuccessful policy of economic and diplomatic isolation, making it extremely difficult even for the President of the United States to reverse the policy.

Congress has taken action before to lift parts of Helms-Burton and modify OFAC rules; more than once, Congress has seen its vote undone by last-minute action of the White House and the Congressional leadership. A willingness on the part of the President and legislative leaders to allow the will of Congress to be respected is central to any change in U.S. policy toward Cuba.

### **Why would such changes produce better results?**

It is clear that the present policy will not succeed, just as it has failed for 46 years, even when it had a better probability of success. A change in policy cannot guarantee results, but it offers new possibilities and a better chance of success. Cuba's leadership is undergoing change, and there is a new opportunity for the U.S. to find willing partners in a process of changing the painful and unproductive relations between the two countries. The U.S. can approach this moment of change on the island in one of two ways: It can persist in the hard line policy of regime change; or it can make use of the opening to pursue a new relationship. If it chooses the former option, it is likely to find an equally hard-line response that will become institutionalized as a new generation takes over upon the death of Fidel Castro. Such an outcome would extend indefinitely what has been a record of unremitting policy failure. The peoples of the United States and Cuba deserve better.